

## THE DAY LUST LEFT THE ROOM

When we turned the corner onto Rushcliffe Street, it was as if the city dropped away behind us. The street was quiet, leafy, dim. There was a high rise set back from the street on the left, but it seemed to loom like a quiet, benign giant rather than to own the block. At the end of the street, which turned out to be a short one-way block that dead-ended, was a smaller building, wider than it was tall, with an elegant, clever wrought-iron entry and windows lined up regularly along its four stories.

This was where we found ourselves drawn, this was where we accosted the young couple going in the doorway and Jonathan asked about the building. The couple was either too ignorant or too innocent to be suspicious of us – or perhaps we were simply too benign ourselves to look in any way threatening – so they asked us in. Their apartment was to the left on the second floor, and it was nice. Very nice, actually, with smooth hardwood floors, white walls, no obvious cracks anywhere yet. Generous windows, ceilings of a decent height, gracious proportions. A few months later, we moved into the apartment to the right on the third floor.

The young couple reminded me of us in our early days. Jonathan and I met at one of those standard-issue graduate school parties – beer flowing freely, music blasting, pretentious pseudo-intellectual but heartbreakingly sincere conversations drowning out even the music.

I've always been tall; in those days, I usually wore jeans, shirts with collars, Mexican ponchos and boots. Jonathan is also tall, but when we met he seemed more precise somehow, more defined than other people, as if the linear nature of his ambition, his focus and his drive had taken over his very appearance. Over time, Jonathan has lost some of his definition (perhaps as a result of being with me), although I don't think I've lost my own haziness or gained appreciably in precision. Wherever the definition he lost may have gone, it didn't take up residence in me.

Jonathan has a very detailed memory of our original meeting, but the details seem beside the point to me, and maybe even wrong. I have no memory of the details, but I remember the feeling intensely, as if I'd had it yesterday rather than nearly thirty years ago. Heightened awareness of the light in the room, departure completely of the sound, a fade into blurriness of the talking heads and sprawling bodies, a halo of sparkling light around Jonathan – I was transfixed. I remember staring at him, the intensity of my stare rousing his attention, our eyes meeting.

My memory is not like a movie, but rather like a slide show that provides the overall structure of the story and enough events to piece together the plot. I remember nothing about any conversation with him or leaving the party. The next slide in my memory is of being in his apartment, its clutter briefly piercing the singularity of my focus on him, then receding. I remember the feeling of awkwardness, of wanting to be past this stage, the very brief pretense of conversation, refreshment, the clumsy fumbling with lips and clothes, and then the moment when consciousness, will, awkwardness sacrificed themselves to lust and gave way.

Our besotted state lasted for several weeks. Lust was our constant companion. Electricity sang along our skins, precluding rational thought, making food and clothing

irrelevant, keeping us at a fever pitch of concentration on one another. We did go to work, but luckily neither of us had a position of any responsibility in those days. We went to school, too, but if we learned anything it came in through some sort of educational osmosis or at some unconscious level altogether, for minutes after either one of us left class we couldn't have told you which class it had been. Engorged as we were, we found tranquility and occasionally sleep only immediately after slaking our thirst for each other, and then only briefly.

And then one day the haze lifted. Oddly, it happened to both of us at the same time, but it wasn't as if Jonathan's ambition resurfaced or I came to my senses or some external event demanded our attention. I saw it quite clearly: lust simply got up and left the room. When I turned to look at Jonathan, the light around him was transformed into normal light.

I have thought often since then that the memory of those weeks powered our whole subsequent relationship, our whole marriage. Jonathan didn't appear to have noticed that we lost something that day, that getting on with our lives transformed the besotted state into an episode, a discrete thing in the past. He found himself in love with me; he asked me to marry him; I did; we had kids and raised them; we had careers and did well in them. Our lives have been mostly smooth and pleasing, and now we live in a lovely apartment to the right on the third floor on a quiet, leafy street in the midst of a big city.

I have mourned the day lust got up and left the room every day since. First, I kept expecting it to return, then eventually I gave up on that and started using the memory of that intensity to flavor everyday life. Throughout the engagement, the marriage, the kids, and the careers, I never again lost my attention to detail or my sense of myself as an individual, a discrete unit. I have not been unhappy, except occasionally and then for good and specific reason, but I have never gotten over the sense that I once held, then lost, something extraordinary. And I have never stopped expecting to recapture it or trying to understand what it was and where it fits into my relationship with Jonathan.

For a while, I figured this was just the way things were – you had some chemical reaction to someone to draw you together, probably some biological thing designed to ensure the propagation of the species, then, once you were sufficiently linked, the chemical reaction extinguished itself and was replaced by the more prosaic, less combustible linkages of everyday life. Being together, learning about one another, talking about the future – love, I supposed – it was all a matter of life going on. Oh, Jonathan and I still made love, quite a lot in the early years, but we weren't lost in each other, in bed or out of it, after that besotted few weeks.

Here, too, Jonathan didn't appear to notice the difference. If you asked him, he even used the word; he said he was besotted with me. For my part, though, I felt both more discrete and less visible to him, once lust left the room and Jonathan got out of bed, cleared the vestiges of fog from his eyes and brain, and went back to life as usual. I didn't feel abandoned, for I, too, had climbed back into my own skin and rejoined ordinary life, but I constantly felt, first as a hollow, then as the years passed as a faint nagging, like a very small pebble in my shoe, the difference between going about regular activities consciously as an individual and living in a besotted state of oblivious combustion as an entity – not part of a group of two, but rather a doubled whole.

I went through a short phase of blaming Jonathan, his linear drive, his precision, his conventionality, for the loss I felt. This, I knew, shocked him since he wasn't aware or, at least, never acknowledged the existence of any loss. He thought our lives were great. Even on close examination, tearful and late into the nights, he stuck to his assertion that we had a wonderful relationship, smooth and pleasant, passionate, happy (with the sole but notable exception of these fits of mine, where I seemed to be trying to make something wrong out of serenity and contentment).

I couldn't reasonably dispute this, but I also couldn't help doubting Jonathan's depth or, sometimes, his sincerity. How was it possible that he didn't perceive and mourn the difference between our lives as we were living them and our lives during those few besotted weeks? *Was there no difference for him?* And, if not, did I exist for him at all as a separate person, as myself, or was I merely the embodiment of a construct of his own making, a hologram in whom he saw what he wanted and needed to see? Had those extraordinary weeks been purely a coincidence – a matter of his construct of me just happening to coincide with my sense of my own true self in a way that made me feel open, known, part of something more than ordinary life?

I stopped blaming Jonathan. My feelings for him, about him, altered to accommodate his apparent unawareness or indifference to our shared loss, but I didn't hate him or despise him. I continued to appreciate what I found to appreciate about him, which was a great deal, and turned my focus to myself.

Was I lonely? No, it was more that I was alone or, more correctly, discrete. I was discrete before those besotted weeks, and I have been discrete since they ended. I've never minded actually being alone; in fact, I prefer my own company to that of most of the people I come into contact with as I go about my career, my life.

It is the sense of being alone by virtue of being unknown that I mind. I have no desire to be famous or acclaimed, but I miss with a yearning deep into my bones that feeling of being a single entity of two rather than of one. I miss being known and understood, *seen*, at the same time lost in someone else and also whole.

Whether or not Jonathan actually shared that feeling, that sensation, became less important to me. The point was that *I* had felt it, sensed it, lived it. For a brief and enchanted interlude, I was both more and less than just myself. I had felt outside the stream of time, outside the petty concerns and insecurities and workings of my own self, part of the rushing current of something bigger and essential and timeless and not of my own making or subject to my control. I had felt alive.

I have never been the kind of person who routinely loses herself. I've been advised a million times by a thousand different people to lighten up, to think less, to take things less seriously. I don't actually take things too seriously, but I've learned that it often appears to others as if I do.

Even after I outgrew the child's lack of awareness that I could use my behavior to influence how others responded to and treated me, I continued to behave pretty much as I saw fit, without seeking to tailor my behavior or my thoughts to what others seemed to want or expect. I rarely substitute the opinions and judgments of others for

my own opinions and judgments. Because of this self-containment, I presume, most people seem to find me aloof, enigmatic, blurry.

I enjoy my own company and that of the few friends I always have – friends who changed names and faces as elementary school turned into high school, then college, then graduate school, then life, but who have always seemed to possess the same essential personalities and attributes. I've never felt the pull, the anxiety, the bone-deep need to belong, to be popular, to be thought of in a certain way by others that some of my friends and, eventually, my children spoke of so passionately.

Jonathan had broken through my self-containment. I don't know how or why. At this point in our lives, I really don't care much about the details, even though I long for the lost feeling with the same intensity as ever and I still can't shake the belief that my relationship with Jonathan is somehow intrinsic to it.

I once cared passionately about the hows and the whys and spent countless hours and unflagging energy trying to tease out the details that would allow me to resurrect or replicate the lost feeling. Jonathan did not share the personality and attributes that have characterized my small parade of friends over the years, both before and after he was in the picture. He was crisp, solid, defined – a gleaming train of a vivid color proceeding steadily along sharp, unambiguous tracks to a particular destination of his choosing.

But I had only intimations of those qualities when I lost myself with him and, in any event, I paid no conscious attention to them. I wasn't drawn to Jonathan because of those qualities. Indeed, even after Jonathan, I was still not drawn to people with those qualities, but rather, as always, to blurrier people, people who, like me, were more internally than externally focused and defined. So, I asked myself, was Jonathan, the fundamental Jonathan, as irrelevant to my experience during the besotted weeks as I had ever since felt that I, the fundamental Angela, was irrelevant to Jonathan's view of our relationship, our life together, our happiness?

This line of thinking led me, unsurprisingly, back to chemistry and sex. I asked myself if the experience I believed to be life-defining, itself both suggestion and proof that I was more than simply the accumulation of my thoughts, my pettifogging concerns, my accomplishments, my person – was that experience in reality nothing more than a biological imperative writ large by my feverish, hyperactively introspective nature?

I started looking at the men around me differently, hoping to catch them in the sparkling light that had once engulfed Jonathan and inflamed us both. I didn't see that light again even when, with some reluctance, I tried a few times to create it, to summon it forcefully.

I was forced to ask myself if the light was gone from the earth and no longer there for anyone to see or if for some reason just I had become unable to perceive it. Other people seemed to be hooking up and sleeping around and having relationships and behaving besottedly, so it seemed reasonable to assume that at least some of them were seeing that light. I doubted I was the only person in the history of time who had ever seen it or felt its impact, however differently others might describe it.

Did a person only get one such experience? I thought this unlikely, too. Whose rule would something like that be and how, really, could it be enforced? Was I to believe that one's very cells were programmed so that, having seen the light once, one was blinded and unable to see it again? That seemed unnecessarily cruel to me, and malicious in a way that implied a higher authority with an organized plan. I am not a believer in higher authorities with organized plans, particularly malicious ones.

Not yet sure that I couldn't recapture the lost feeling via lust, I had tried to manufacture the necessary lust, first with Jonathan and then with another. I succeeded in delighting Jonathan and pleasing myself and the other, but I didn't lose myself again. I did, however, rediscover lust and so was obliged to consider that whatever had gotten up and left the room on the day the besotted weeks ended might not have been lust after all.

With the other, a fireman I locked eyes with when I took my young daughter to a safety day at the local fire station, I uncovered intense lust, more intense even than during those weeks with Jonathan. Not better results so much as a more intent, hungrier physical craving. I imagine that the popular myth about the sexiness of firemen, like most myths, is probably more the result of wishes and expectations and projection than the way firemen actually are, but you couldn't prove that by my experience. My fireman was lanky in a raw-boned way, a graceful animal without inhibition or, apparently, even a speck of self-consciousness. He was verbally inarticulate and physically a poet.

Despite my hunger for him, to my great disappointment I remained self-contained, individual during our affair. After a while, he went back to working the day shift and I never saw him again. I did wonder for a while what might happen if there were ever a fire at our house (he would surely show up; it was a small suburb), but there never was.

Over the years, I have accumulated a collection of perfect moments, moments of pure happiness. I keep the memories of these moments close, like a small bowl of smooth, cool skipping stones, each containing within it the potency to release, when I hold it in my hand, the shape and feeling of the original moment.

One: Driving one mid-October day, in what would turn out to be my favorite of the procession of cars we owned over the years, a nostalgic song on the radio, autumn leaves swirling ankle deep in a wind presaging winter, I saw a jogger wearing those too short, too tight shorts that certain men wear far past the time they should have been thrown out, as if to be able to exclaim, "I've fit into these since junior high!" I laughed aloud and, in the laughing, realized I was utterly and unconditionally happy.

Another: Walking with Jonathan across the Pont Archevêché in Paris, toward the Left Bank, I turned for one more look at Notre Dame. In the sunlight glistening off the Seine, the dazzling cathedral eloquently proclaimed the fervor that inspired medieval architects and craftsmen to build so far beyond the capabilities of their tools and knowledge, making both their fervor and their creation immortal. With a sudden and breathtaking certainty, I understood that I had joined a flow of like feeling, experienced and to be experienced by people long-dead and still to come. As tears sprang into my

eyes, Jonathan wordlessly wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and I knew he felt it too.

Another: A few days after one of Jonathan's promotions, I was walking back to my office after a meeting, congratulating myself on a negotiation particularly well-handled, when I suddenly found myself remembering the physical celebration Jonathan and I had made for his promotion. In the icy sharp winter air, I was flooded with warmth and thrilled by a sensation as intense and complete as the one I was remembering.

Another: Cooking the usual Thanksgiving food the year our youngest child, home from college for the first time, was suffused with that quiet, independent, personal happiness that had nothing to do with his childhood life, I realized with a sense of awakening that Jonathan and I had raised children well able to make their own ways in the world. Listening to the voices of the assembled crowd in the next room, the sounds of a football game on TV and the smells of the food combining to underpin and make familiar the whole experience, I had a sense of completion and déjà vu so strong that my hands stopped their work and, for a moment, I was both in the moment and outside it, watching it with satisfaction, approval and gratitude.

These and the others in my little heap of perfect moments, like the lost feeling of the besotted weeks, are to me equally intimation and proof that I am both more and less than just myself, that I am outside the orderly stream of time, that I am fully alive.

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A few months after our move to Rushcliffe Street, I was sitting by what would soon be my favorite window, reading by the soft shine of a lamp. (Many years later, looking out that window as dusk darkens into night, I still haven't have shaken my sense of wonder at Rushcliffe Street. I'm still not sure the street is not merely around a corner, but rather through a portal into a world of greater clarity.)

It was early evening, winter, dark outside. In the middle of a sentence in my book, I suddenly felt the need to look up and out the window. On the big street at the end of the block, people were streaming by, heading home from work. There were a few people walking on Rushcliffe Street, their outlines blurred by the dim streetlights.

A moment after I looked up, Jonathan rounded the corner and I was startled to see that he was radiating a sharp light, a light of an altogether different quality than that shining from the hazy streetlights. It was, in fact, the same halo of sparkling light in which I first saw him all those years ago. Staring into that light, I felt my brain click and shift, my knowledge kaleidoscope into a new pattern.

I realized that for nearly thirty years I had been mourning a loss that never occurred.

The dizzying merger of my discrete self into a bigger whole – which I felt as such a keen relief during the besotted weeks and had longed for so acutely ever since – had after all been permanent and irrevocable. The bewitching shape of those weeks merely changed, and I mistook the change for loss. Lust did indeed get up and leave the room the day those extraordinary weeks ended, but it did not take with it what it had helped to make plain. Its work done, lust went off about its business, perhaps to introduce someone else into the tide of connection.

In the sparkling light once again illuminating Jonathan, I could see that it was the accurately-perceived reality of the besotted weeks, and not the nostalgia for them, that powered everything that followed for us. Just as I recognized without understanding at the time, during those weeks I did tap into something bigger and timeless and outside myself. I did lose my separateness, did discover my true self blended into and with Jonathan, in a connectedness that has never been a matter of choice or a conscious decision, never something of my own making or subject to my control.

What began as an obvious giving over of individuality, a heightened obsessive blending, went on to assume a succession of different, less obvious forms, each no less complete, no less true, no less solid than the original brazen form – much as the body is the body whether it is draped in evening wear, disguised by a Halloween costume or clad only in naked skin. My return to my senses, to my transformed individuality, after those besotted weeks did not signal a loss, but merely a bow, and a graceful one at that, to the inevitability of life going on as it does.

I heard Jonathan's key in the lock, left my seat by the window, and opened the door for him.